

VZCZCXRO5479
RR RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #1508/01 2340915
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 210915Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7212
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5//
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001508

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/20/2017
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: HOW TURKEY'S YOUTH VIEW THE US: LOSING A
GENERATION?

REF: A. ANKARA 1168
[1](#)B. ISTANBUL 137
[1](#)C. ANKARA 1782
[1](#)D. ANKARA 1104

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Kelly Degnan for reasons 1.4(b),(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and Comment. Turkey faces a "demographic window of opportunity," with 60% of its population under the age of 30. Politically disengaged and generally neglected as a resource by political parties (refA), young Turks face high unemployment and a country struggling to balance tradition with modernization. Those who work with this largely excluded segment fear a "time bomb" of dissatisfied youths, most of whom grew up witnessing domestic and regional conflict and endemic corruption. The majority favors a decrease or total cessation of Turkish-US relations, with a growing number opposed both to American policies and Americans as people. While many young Turks predict a new US president will improve bilateral relations significantly, they urged the US to intensify outreach to Turkey's youth, before anti-Americanism congeals in the minds of Turkey's future leaders. End Summary and Comment.

Tomorrow's Leaders: Turkey's Youth Demographic

[1](#)2. (C) With 60% of Turkey's population under 30, according to a 2007 census, the country faces what the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) calls a "demographic window of opportunity"; in 15 years, today's youth will form the majority of Turkey's workforce and decision makers. A politically and economically neglected resource, Turkey's youth is coming of age in a time of polarization, corruption and high unemployment; approximately 18% of young Turks are unemployed, versus an overall rate of 10%. UNDP said rectifying this employment vacuum is "the most critical issue" for Turkey's long-term stability and growth, a view echoed in discussions with Turkish youth from diverse economic and social backgrounds. Students and teachers also complain that Turkey's educational system focuses extensively on rote memorization, rather than critical thinking, leaving students ill-equipped for a competitive, globalized world (refs B,C,D). In a March 2008 Metropoll survey of university students, only 22% viewed Turkey's future positively; 69% felt Turkey is heading for the worse. Serdar Dinler, manager of the Jean Monnet scholarship program, warned of a "time bomb" if this significant segment of Turkey's society remains disenfranchised and disaffected.

Perceptions of the US: Slipping, But Not Yet Lost

13. (C) Over 50% of university students felt Turkish-US relations should either decrease or totally cease, according to Metropoll's survey; 46% identified the US as the most serious external threat to the Turkish Republic, with terrorism a distant second at 11%. Several young Turks pointedly asked us, "After the US invades Iran, will Turkey be next?" One Middle East Technical University student described the Turkish-US relationship as having devolved from a parent (the US) watching out for his child's (Turkey) interests, to the US as neighborhood bully. Unsal Genc, a leader of youth movement Genc Ari Hareketi, and others attribute negative perceptions of the US to media coverage, perceived slights against the interests of Muslims and the Turkish Republic, and negative portrayal by professors, parents, and peers. Genc worried these anti-American views formed by youth today are likely to remain their opinion for years to come. Soner Cagaptay, Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, explained that Turkey's youth have witnessed a string of negative events, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Abu Ghraib scandal, perceived inaction or even support by the USG of terrorist PKK groups in northern Iraq, Congressional efforts to pass an Armenian genocide resolution, and the July 4, 2003 hooding of 11 Turkish Special Forces soldiers detained by US forces. These incidents have begun to congeal in the minds of Turkey's youth, Cagaptay said, shaping their perceptions and leading to a potentially long-lasting, negative view of the US. Osman Gokcek, president of the Turkey Youth Federation (Turkiye Genclik Federasyonu) and son of Ankara Mayor Melih Gokcek, agreed

ANKARA 00001508 002 OF 003

with Cagaptay's diagnosis, noting Turkey's youth have "known only violence." Many hold the US responsible for regional bloodshed, particularly regarding Iraq and the PKK. The US is losing Turkey's youth, Gokcek warned, adding they are not yet irretrievably lost.

14. (C) While young Turks we met with frequently called the US a hegemon or "empire," many voiced frustration at America's inability or unwillingness to control world events and more actively advocate for human rights, political freedoms, and international stability. One student acknowledged the US, as the world's most powerful nation, is also the most criticized and blamed. Several youth described Turkey's relationship with the US as "one-way," with Turkey "powerless" and "paying tribute"; they claimed USG officials fail to adequately consider Turkey's interests and needs. Many view US interests in Turkey as economic and military-centric, with secondary or superficial commitment to other issues. Turkey "doesn't benefit" from the bilateral relationship, they concluded.

America vs. Americans

15. (C) Many young Turks critical of the US clarified they oppose the USG, not the American people. A significant increase in student and Summer Work/Travel visa applications reflects continued interest by Turkey's youth, even if initial motivations are often economic rather than cultural. Embassy Consular Officers report former Summer Work/Travel students often return seeking a student visa. Many who visited the US told us how surprised they were by Americans' warmth and hospitality, and by Americans' genuine interest in Turkey. Despite these positive impressions, others warned that Americans are increasingly seen as linked to deeply unpopular USG policies.

16. (C) Cenk Kupeli, President of the Grand Youth Association (Buyuk Genclik Dernegi), predicts that as Turkish youth with access to technology communicate directly with more Americans, friendships and political ties will form that could stimulate political activism. Cultural connections between Americans and Turks remain strong, Kupeli said, adding such relationships should be

expanded. His initial impression of the US and the Ambassador as unreachable and aloof changed completely after attending a movie night hosted by the Ambassador, who he found to be warm and welcoming, he said. He suggested additional youth-targeted events, expanded exchange programs and increased activism by American NGOs in Turkey to break down perceived barriers. According to Serdar Dinler, the US needs to become more accessible to all of Turkey, not just the elite and highly educated. The private sector Summer Work/Travel, rather than programs like the Fulbright fellowship, provides a better model for expansion, he said. The US must "play the long game" and seriously commit to improving opportunities and resources for Turkish youth if it wants to improve perceptions of the US, Dinler commented.

A Fresh Start?

17. (C) Turkish youth we met with were nearly unanimous in condemning recent USG policies, particularly regarding Iraq and perceived US support for the PKK (refC). Maintaining that much of the criticism centers around the President, Kupeli suggested the November elections would begin to repair the divide, regardless of who wins. While many we spoke with are not closely following the election, those who are frequently cited the historic impact of electing an African-American. Some felt Barak Obama would be more sympathetic to the needs of Turkey and the Middle East, a tendency several attributed to the false rumor that Obama is a Muslim. Others were concerned Obama would support an Armenian genocide resolution, igniting further anti-Americanism. A less optimistic segment doubts a new president will significantly improve Turkish-American relations; they view the anchoring economic, political, and strategic calculations of the US as unmalleable and problems in Iraq as likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Kupeli strongly urged the US not to wait for a new president to start improving America's image among Turkey's youth.

ANKARA 00001508 003 OF 003

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

SILLIMAN